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ST. ELISABETH'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

ACHIEVING OUR GOALS 1974 - 1978

In 1974, I became a member of St. Elisabeth's Church. At that time, Fr. Bridge was the Vicar. The first time I attended services at St. Elisabeth's I was touched by the warm and friendly reception I received. I was impressed as I became familiar with the people in the parish and became very involved through the infectious spirit of work and cooperation that existed. The parish itself presented a well-kept look in the interior of the Church and the people seemed cooperative and caring. I had never experienced such a warm spirit of brotherhood and unity in any Church I had attended.

Soon, however, I was to become acquainted with the problems of St. Elisabeth's. In 1974, the parish did not have a formal vestry, and did not have any organized method of handling workload. Parish meetings in which the business of the parish was handled were drawn out by bickering and disagreement. Although the parish was concerned with community outreach, those programs which did exist were incomplete and disorganized. It seemed that the parish was working hard and efforts were getting nowhere. All systems of parish oversight had completely collapsed. The parish had no by-laws from which it operated, no records and no means of handling the mounting property problems.

The congregation looked to Fr. Bridge as the only source of leadership. The burden of financial oversight, paperwork and all types of management fell upon his shoulders. An atmosphere of distrust developed between the Vicar and the congregation. I began to feel the frustration and helplessness all of the members of the congregation shared. We were too small, overworked, disorganized, and too poor to really change anything. Some members dropped off, either because they moved out of the area, or because the frustration just became too much. The morale of the parishoners was low, their determination undercut by an almost certain closing. Spiritual energy was drained and resentments, distrust and hurt feelings grew. Still, somewhere in all of the frustration the Spirit of God held us together. In spite of all of the parish's problems, worship on Sunday was touched with a real sense of Christian fellowship.

Although the future looked questionable, when Fr. Bridge announced he was leaving in early 1975, the parish, with the assistance of the Bishop, began to look for a new Vicar. Fr. Gallagher was hired on a part-time basis as a result of that search.

Beginning in 1975, under the guidance of our new Vicar, the parish began to look at its ministry in a new way. People in the parish began to have a new awareness of their strengths as opposed to being overwhelmed by their main weakness. The parish, as a whole, reclaimed the wealth of gifts God had given

to it so long ago and began to develop those gifts.

In that year, the parish, at a meeting on All Saints Day, stated three definite goals for the future:

I. TO GROW AS INDIVIDUALS, PERSONALLY & SPIRITUALLY

Over the last three years, particularly, the last 1 1/2 years, St. Elisabeth's has come a long way toward this goal.

First, the parish as a whole, in 1976, was still largely groping for sound control of its business affairs. Although the parish was moving toward the foundation of an organized system of stewardship, people in the parish were not fully responsible. People had gotten used to not being responsible over the past few years. We were still letting our Vicar run the show, and carry most of the workload. The parish morale was devastatingly impaired by the sense of frustration and helplessness that had become an excuse for not taking stewardship too seriously. I remember quite vividly a Sunday morning when Fr. Gallagher asked for a certain number of people in the parish to commit themselves to work toward growth for a period of three years. I knew what would happen to that group. They would volunteer, work hard for a few months, become discouraged, and dissappear. This is just what is bound to happen when you've struggled for years with little or no success. I wondered how long it would take for our new Vicar to become discouraged with the situation. I know I was not alone in that thought. The people in the parish were pushed, led and even hounded about stewardship. Over time, it became apparent that some of it was beginning to have an effect.

The most important event in our parish's development happened late in 1976. The Bishop had decided to give the parish a grant to develop a viable parish in the South Philadelphia area. Finally, after years of struggle and neglect, we were being recognized. People changed their attitude. They began to see that someone really did care, besides themselves, whether or not St. Elisabeth's stayed open; that it was not our little congregation against the Episcopal Church (and the world in general) fighting for survival. The Bishop had seen and recognized that we were ready to grow, wanted to grow and would work hard to make that happen. The sense of hopelessness and defeat had been changed to new vitality and enthusiasm. Most important, however, is the fact that now poeple realized that our Church was blessed by God and in existence only by His mercy and goodness.

Growth in the parish stability came in leaps and bounds with this new attitude. Within the first 14 months, we had an elected vestry, who under the guidance of our Vicar (now full-time) and his staff, developed a set of by-laws and began to function in a way that would make any congregation proud. I recently joined the vestry to fill an empty seat. I had been on the vestry before in prior years and was amazed at the change in this group of people. They were organized, decisive and seemed to be of one mind in seeking the ultimate good of the parish as a whole.

It would be very difficult to decide whether our stewardship growth initiated our spiritual growth or the other way around. I won't try. It seems as though both occurred at the same time and so quickly it was almost unnoticed.

Somewhere along the line the vision of the parish was changed. When I first came to the parish, there were approximately 25 members, all committed to work hard to keep the congregation alive. Today, there are about the same number of people all working hard out of their commitment to serving Jesus Christ and making His Kingdom apparent in this world. They are all aware that He is Lord and Savior of all things and are doing their best to exercise responsible stewardship over His gifts. Every parishoner is more aware of the presence of God in everyday life; and how whatever one does, it can be turned into "ministry" if we seek Him out in our daily work and relaxation. To say we all have experienced spiritual growth is an understatement. I believe the word used in a report made in 1975 was "renasence", I would prefer the word "renewal".

Disagreements which before split the congregation and caused people to "dissappear" were now brought into the open and settled. The diversity of the parish is a source of strength and knowledge, bringing us a challenge to understanding the nature of Christian love. When the peace is passed at the Eucharist on Sunday morning, it is truly the peace of the Lord.

Our growth shows, spiritually and personally. When I was away from the parish for about six months, I was amazed at the change in different individuals. Our growth shows; it shows in our worship, our interest in retreats, quiet days, etc.; it shows in our interest in developing our awareness of God's presence in our lives. We have learned to respect each other, try to understand each other and love each other, regardless of the tensions and disagreements. Most of all, we have learned how to work with each other (and sometimes around each other) to overcome the difficulties of being such a small parish. We have learned how to be supportive of one another when it is necessary, and how and when to ask for support. There is no one at St. Elisabeth's who doesn't know that they belong first to Jesus Christ, then to the whole Episcopal Church, and then to the family of St. Elisabeth's. The beauty is that we can all express that belonging in our individual ways, within the same parish, and share that expression.

Several of our members have become or are in the process of becomming associates of a religious order. A Rule of Life is required for Sub-deacons, Lay-readers, Officers, Teachers and recommended to the vestry. Most of our members live under a Rule which includes the Daily Office on a regular basis.

The Christian Life Institute has been attended at least in part by almost half of our members. All of our members are pledging higher and digging deeper into their own pockets to help support the parish efforts. Most important, when the Eucharist

is distributed on Sunday morning, everyone in the Church goes to the rail, no one stays behind.

In general, the parish is taking its faith, and its responsibility, very seriously. This, I would say, is a substantial sign of the growth and maturity of our parish.

II. GROWTH IN MINISTRY TO OTHERS

St. Elisabeth's has now several community groups using its grounds as a meeting place, including the Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, ACORN (a community-organized, City-funded program for youth), and others. This is only in addition to activities of our own. We have education programs (Christian Life Institute, S.E.E.K., and our Sunday School). In the Summer of 1978, S.E.E.K. organized and sponsored a Summer Day Camp which was filled to capacity with children from the neighborhood. This program was highly successful in bringing the children to realize their identity as Christians, as well as making their parents aware of St. Elisabeth's as a Christian fellowship interested in the community around it. A number of the children who attended the Day Camp are now attending our Sunday School.

ACORN used our facilities during the Summer months to show films to the young teens of the neighborhood. ACORN will be using the facilities again in the coming months.

S.E.E.K., in cooperation with M.A.T.C., offers several events a year such as Human Interaction Weekend, Life-Planning Weekend, Working Effectively in Small Groups, and others, showing the community that we are interested in the world they live in, as well as their spiritual lives.

There are many other activities going on in the parish than can be mentioned. It seems, whenever I am at the Church for any reason, it is always occupied by a meeting somewhere.

In that same report in 1975, the parish mentioned wanting to be a "visible sign of God's Kingdom in a community which is now experiencing a certain racial and generational tension." I believe we are that visible sign. Our congregation is diverse in age, race, educational background, and economic background. Our flag, an orange and yellow Jerusalem Cross, hangs above Mifflin Street setting the rectory door apart from the rest. That flag is passed under, at all times, by all manner of people; black, white, old and young. Our bells have been mentioned by several of the neighborhood people as being part of their lives. Our presence in the neighborhood is important to people. Our diversity stands as a testimony that Christian fellowship can overcome any difference.

III. TO GROW IN ACTIVE MEMBERSHIP

The parish has grown in active membership over the last three years. This has taken place in two ways; first, there are some new and very active members; second, some of the old members have become more active. Our average attendance at a regular

Sunday Eucharist is noticeably higher, but we still have a long way to go. It is most difficult for me to understand why a parish like St. Elisabeth's isn't "standing room only" on a Sunday morning. This indicates our major problem. People don't know what they are missing. We need to learn how to tell them.

In October of 1978, a number of parishoners, including Fr. Gallagher, attended the National Episcopal Renewal Conference in Pittsburgh. Out of that Conference a method of evangelism, though it is now in its very earliest stages, was instituted. Parishoners will be visiting lapsed and infrequent members in the near future in an attempt to bring them back. The thrust of the visits will be to confront individuals with where their relationship to Jesus Christ is, and how that needs to be connected with the Church in order for it to survive. Two such visits have been made, one very successful. We are looking forward to developing this push into a larger area, getting other interested parishoners to visit people who have signed the guest book, who have shown some type of interest in worship at St. Elisabeth's.

The parish as a whole needs to be made aware of the <u>urgent</u> call to evangelism. I believe the whole Christian Church needs to be more aware that there are too many people in the world hungry and searching for God. People in our parish need to be encouraged and helped to share what they have found in their relationship to Christ and where they go to worship Him.

News is not news unless it is told; Good News isn't Good News unless it is shared with joy and enthusiasm. That means people in our parish need to get excited, need to get bold, need to get just a little bit aggressive. We need to go from personal owning of our faith to an enthusiastic living and sharing of it, silently and verbally.

In 1978, Fr. Gallagher mentioned, in his report to the parish, that we would work to become a "Spritiual Powerhouse". I believe we are now that "Powerhouse", generating love and understanding, peace, goodwill and fellowship, all under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We need to direct that power of the Spirit in our own lives to make us stronger and more powerful witnesses to Jesus Christ. We are presently studying the possibility of advertising in local newspapers, not the usual sort of ad, but one that will reach out and touch people; bring a response. We have a prayer group that meets weekly which has potential for bringing people into the parish; but more important, may help bring people to knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Our third goal is on the horizon, just ahead. I have every reason to believe that God will bless us in this area, too. With concentrated effort, prayer and work, we will achieve that goal. I am confident that God has not rescued us from our former situation without a plan for our future.

Fr. Gallagher has been, all along, a great source of direction and support. He has done a wondrous job, and the people

of the parish have done a wondrous job. With the Holy Spirit as a driving force and our love of the Lord at the center, we will not be defeated again.

I, personally, am proud and thankful to be a part of St. Elisabeth's. I look forward to many years of continued growth and service where I am needed. I believe the Lord led me to the Church because he knew it would be a place for me to find Him, worship Him and serve Him. Attending that first service at St. Elisabeth's was the beginning of something I could never have anticipated; a love affair with my Lord, with the Episcopal Church, and with this parish.

Denise L. Smith

12/78